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ABSTRACT

Students in eleventh grade composition classes in an Ephrata, Washington, high school work in groups to evaluate each other's papers, enabling teachers to handle many more papers in much less time than usual and developing students' writing and evaluatory skills. The sequence used for each course assignment is as follows: (1) The class reads and discusses samples of the kind of writing being assigned. (2) Students work on rough drafts. (3) The class discusses evaluation criteria and builds a rating sheet. (4) Students prepare final drafts. (5) Working in small groups, students read the finished papers and decide how to rate them; they write comments and explanations of their assessments on the papers. The teacher circulates to provide help as needed. (6) The teacher approves and records the assigned points, returning papers to the groups for reevaluation if it seems necessary. (7) Students are given their papers back the next day; papers with disputed grades are returned to the groups for reevaluation. This technique helps students understand how they will be judged, shows them the many ways readers can respond to their writing, and points up the many ways writers respond to a single assignment. (The paper includes charts describing the high school language arts curriculum and its composition strand, a description of the course assignment sequence, and an outline of a typical week's course work.) (GT)

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WHAT IF THE KIDS DID IT?

Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English "Options 80" Conference, Portland, Oregon, April 10-12, 1980

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WHAT IF THE KIDS DID IT?

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By the time we've taught more than a year or two, most of us English teachers have learned that the best way to elicit sympathy from the rest of our colleagues is to sink into a chair in the faculty lounge under a load of the latest batch of essays comparing Romeo to Juliet or motorcycles to motorbikes. We sigh heavily and make sure everyone is fully aware of how we will spend our spring vacation with spectacles and red pen instead of sunglasses and fishing rod. Returning unburned and unrested from our bout with student scrawlings, we are often chagrined to note that the comments we've written at great expense of time, insight and eyesight are barely read by our students, who glance at the grade, beam or complain, and throw the papers in the wastebasket as they file out the door.

What, then, are we trying to accomplish with all that red ink? I think we have two objectives: to instruct the student with all the expertise at our command to improve his or her writing, and to justify the A or C or F marked at the top of the page. Under the pressure of time and class loads, I doubt that our comments truly explain the subtleties of the reactions which led us to judge one paper excellent, another merely mediocre. Further, research shows that marks on their papers constitute a rather ineffective way to improve student writing. Still, we continue to grade, making ourselves the sole and mysteriously expert audiences for whom our students write, boring them and blinding ourselves in the process. Worse, we make our students perceive writing as an activity done for a teacher, not as an attempt to communicate real ideas to a real world.

Recent articles, workshops and textbooks attempt to address this problem by suggesting various means of providing peer and self evaluation. Most of the suggestions involve giving students a checklist or worksheet after an assignment is completed and asking them to proofread for themselves or for their classmates before the work is submitted to the teacher for final grading. Students serve as unrewarded editors and the teacher remains the only valid critic of the work.

Several years ago, two publications prompted me to experiment with a different approach. The first was a report of research which showed that the

teaching method producing the most improvement in student writing was pre-writing presentation which made clear what this assignment expected of the writer. The second was an article which asked what would happen if students thought someone actually paid attention to what they'd written, as we pay attention to adult and serious and professional writers.[1]

In my first attempts to change, I tried checklists and proofreading committees, only to find that these were given only perfunctory attention by my students, whose writing did not improve. And I still had to grade all those papers. Finally, I stumbled on my present method when someone quipped, "Let the kids grade their own stuff." It sounded silly at first, but as my classes in expository composition for high school juniors grew larger and larger, my frustration led me to try desperate measures in my attempts to read and comment on the increasing volumes of work.

Here's what we do:

Each assignment in my twelve-week required composition class for our high school's juniors begins with the whole class reading and discussing samples of the kind of writing they will be asked to produce. If they're going to write a resume, they look at mine and several others done by staff and former students. If they're writing a descriptive or persuasive essay, or a review of a restaurant or a movie or TV show, they read a short piece from a recent magazine. As we move through the course I choose samples which display a variety of simple organization patterns and vivid, clear evidence and imagery. (See Appendix for sequence of assignments.) We discuss the intended audience for each piece of writing and the ways in which the samples attempt to interest and convince or inform those hoped-for readers.

Next, students begin work on their own rough drafts. After a day or two spent putting their own ideas in order, it's time to discuss the criteria for judging this piece of work. I lead a class session in which we build a "Rating Sheet" for the current assignment. Students always include the niceties such as spelling and punctuation; with my encouragement to refer back to the sample they begin to consider the importance of title, introduction, conclusion, proof, specific detail and all the

other items which will mark the difference between mediocre work and an effective piece of writing. For each rating sheet, the class decides on how the total of 100 possible points shall be divided among the items to be evaluated. They begin to recognize uch distinctions as the fact that perfect typing, essential on a resume, may be merely desirable for other writing purposes. We build a new rating sheet for each assignment in each class and this, I think, is the key ingredient in this method. The students choose the basis on which they will evaluate this work because they understand how this particular kind of writing attempts to reach its audience.

At this point they prepare their final drafts, knowing what criteria will be applied. Each student copies the proposed rating sheet from the final version on the blackboard and attaches it to the front of his or her completed paper. I collect the papers, record each as having been completed in case one is ever lost, and ask the students to group themselves into three- to five-person juries. Each student notes in his or her file folder the names of the others in the jury so that later in the course new groupings can be required. Teachers could assign groupings though I tend to let the process remain informal.

Now each group is given one paper for each member of the group. I distribute the papers so that no student evaluates his own work and so that really volatile combinations of enemies or friends are avoided as much as possible. Each paper is read by all members of the group. Working together, the group agrees on the points to be awarded in each category, adds and checks the total, writes comments and explanations of their assessment, and signs each paper. They are asked to praise at least two items on each paper, and, except for the resume, they are encouraged to mark suggested improvements on the paper itself. Before finisning, they compare all the papers in their group's charge with each other and with the list on the blackboard which reads: "90-100=Super-job; 80-89=Excellent work; 70-79=Quite adequate; 60-69=Needs lots of improvement; Below 60=Well, you turned it in." Sometimes I ask two groups to compare their sets of papers as well to see if the same kind of paper is being rated the same way.

By the end of the class period, most groups have completed their work and written several comments on each paper, pointing our why they made

the judgments they did and praising what they liked. All this time I circulate from group to group, commenting, helping, responding to questions. I often find students more critical of poor penmanship than teachers are, needing to be prodded to praise good organization and excellent detail made difficult to read by poor spelling. The juries begin to recognize the range of qualities that constitute good writing.

At the end of the period I collect the signed papers. My job now is to approve and record the points. It takes very little time to read the papers and the comments. If I disagree with an evaluation, I mark the items with which I disagree and return the paper to the jury the next day. When I agree, I circle and initial the final grade and record the points in the grade book. I rarely write a comment myself, though I do use check marks to indicate comments made by the jury which I find especially apt or perceptive and to mark items on the paper itself which I particularly like. Student writers thus receive full comment on their work while I save a great deal of time writing myself. More important, each student receives a range of audience reaction.

The next day, students get their papers back. If they dispute the grade, they come to me and I take the paper back to the jury to explain and possibly to adjust the grade. Only once or twice has a student felt unfairly treated by a jury because of personal bias. Finally, all evaluations complete, papers are filed in students' folders. At the end of the twelve-week term, each student will review this folder to evaluate personal progress. Most are amazed at how much they've learned.

For me as a person, this method is attractive because it makes possible the handling of many more papers in much less time. It is important to note, however, that as class size nears 35 it becomes much more difficult to conduct the discussion so essential to creating true understanding among the students of the writing task and the criteria for judging their results. It also becomes more difficult to monitor and help the juries effectively.

More important, and even more satisfying, is the effect of this technique on students. For perhaps the first time, their opinions really count. For the first time, they write to someone "real". For the first time, they know how they will be judged, and why. For the first time,

they begin to see the many ways in which readers can respond to their own writing. For the first time, they begin to see the many ways in which writers can respond to a single assignment. Writing begins to be less mysterious and more possible for each of them. In fact, I find them writing articulate communications to the student government, to me and to the principal and staff in order to express their views on current happenings in our building.

I asked them what they think of this way of learning to write. Some expressed doubt about the process: The way we graded the papers was great, but I still think it's more your opinion and your evaluation sheet that we graded by every time." More typical were comments like: "The critique sheets and evaluating process were really good learning techniques. The spelling tests were good for most of the people, but I got more out of writing a resume, complaint letter, and the various essays," and "We evaluated ourselves which I didn't like very much. I suppose it had a purpose, but I couldn't see one. I liked evaluating other people's papers." Some students became truly laudatory: "I really liked the way ideas and assignments were presented (samples and examples). The grading system is fair and very accurate." Most seem to enjoy the process, as did this student: "I enjoyed the group sessions and hearing the different points of view classmates have on subjects."

From now on when I want sympathy in the teachers' lounge, I'll have to find another gimmick. Any suggestions?

[1] What If Kids Found Out...That People Really Care About What They Say? Regional Composition Project, Seattle, Washington, 1972.

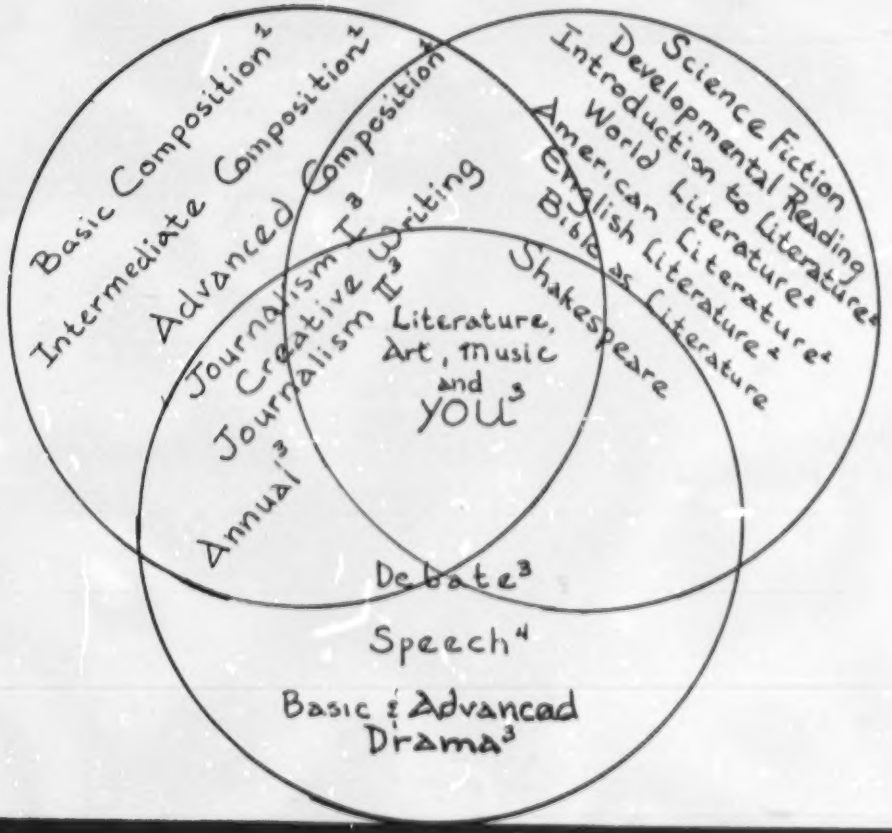
APPENDIX

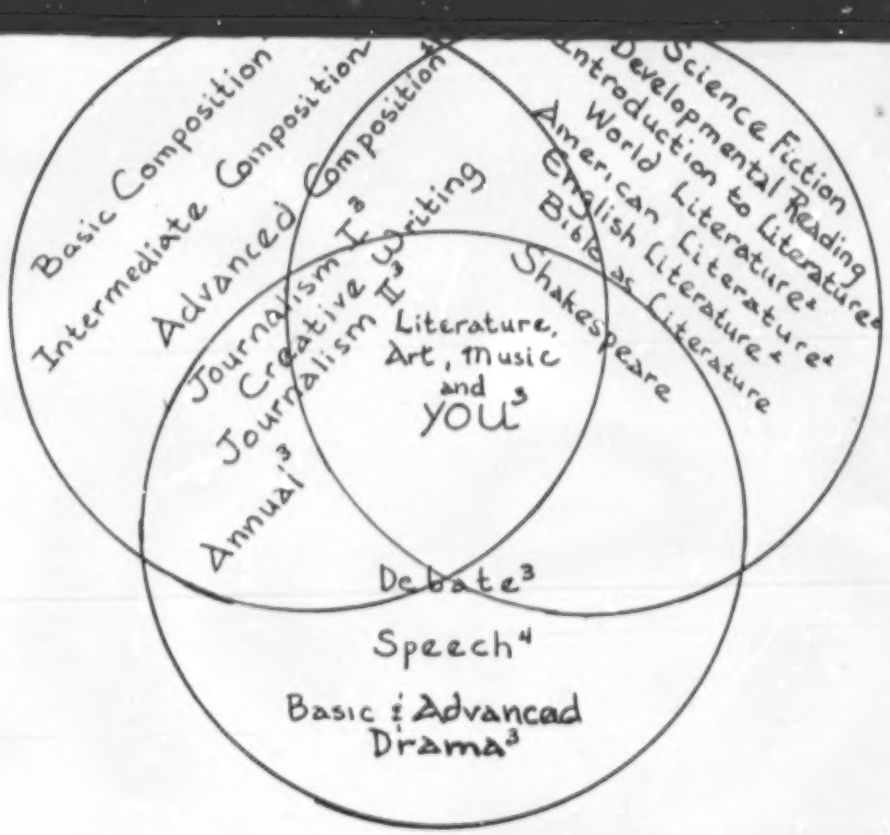
The attached materials describe the scope and sequence of our high school's language arts curriculum and of the composition strand into which the junior level course described in the article fits. Also included is a description of the sequence of assignments for the course itself and of a typical week which demonstrates the process used day by day.

the ephrata English Curriculum

writing

reading





Performing

[1] Required writing course
[2] Required literature - choose any Two
[3] Required communications elective - choose one
[4] Required of all sophomores

Linda Clifton
Ed Hamlett
Shawn Taylor
Melinda Wilson

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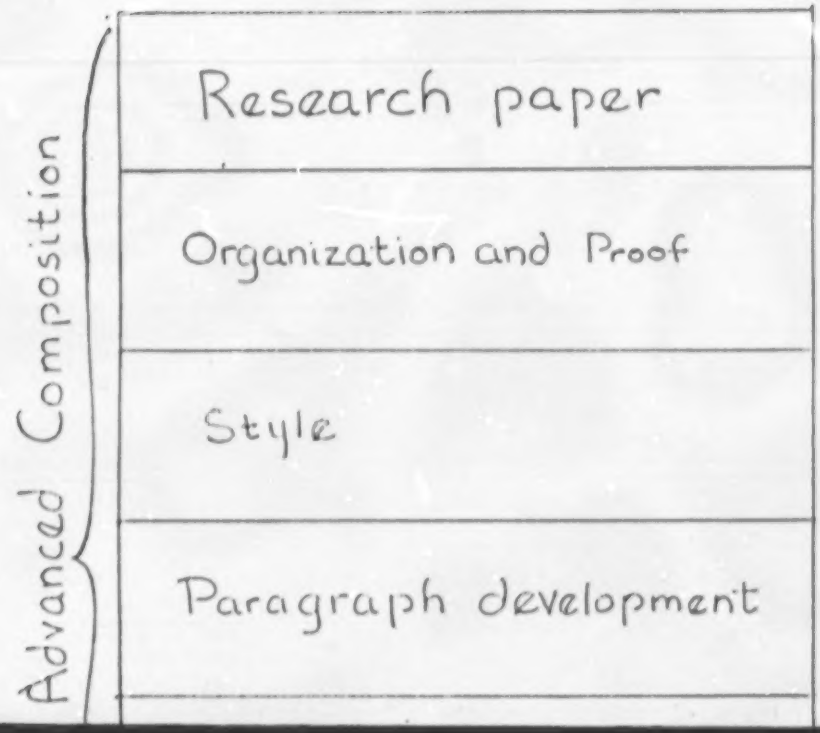
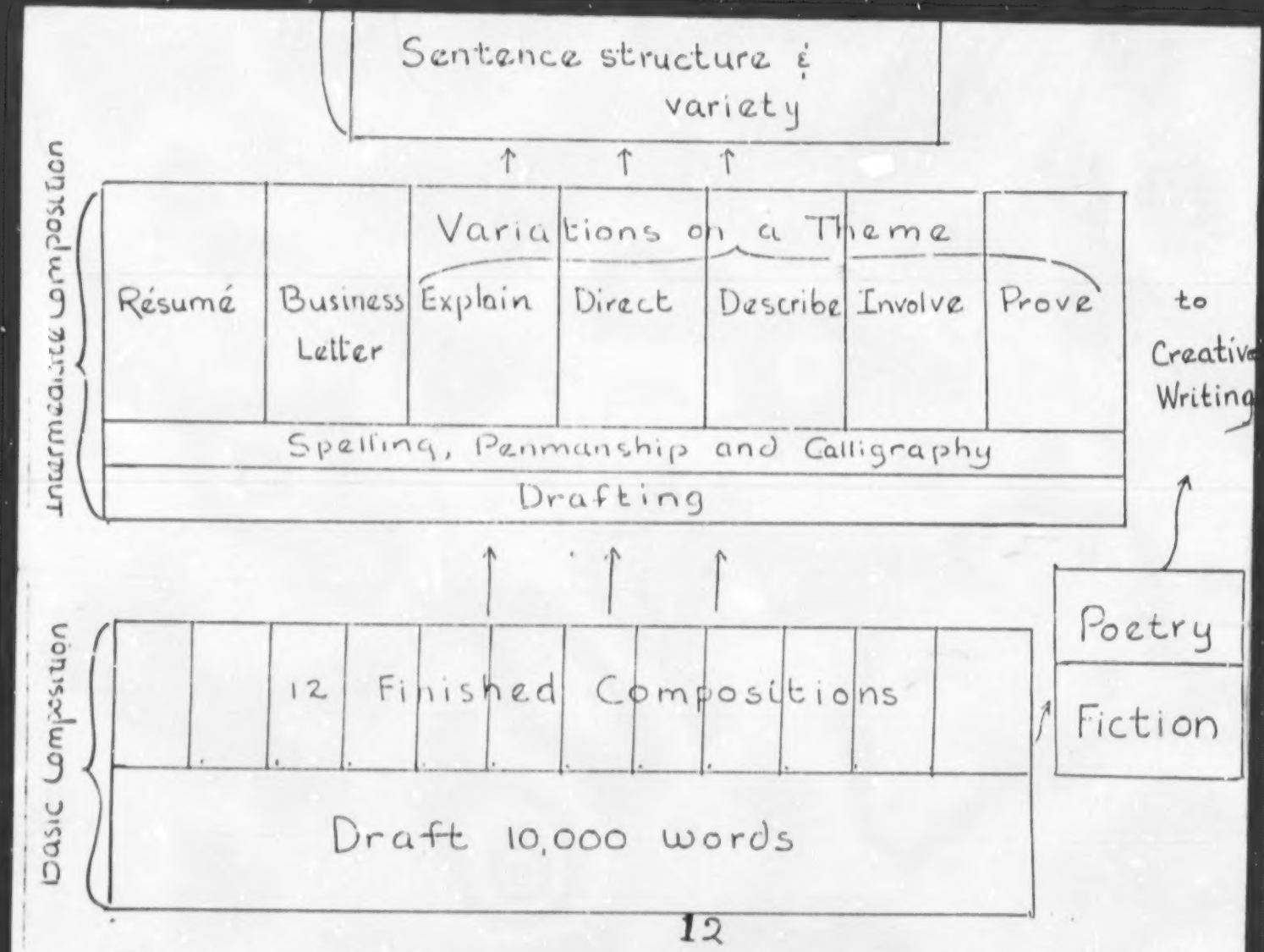
the ephrata composition sequence

focus: the five paragraph theme





Clifton, Taylor Hamlett, Wilson

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WHAT IF THEY WROTE FOR EACH OTHER?
THEY DO.

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OPENING DAY

Student receives Basic Composition folder, selects five best pieces of work to retain and takes rest home.
Stundent completes and staples to folder a paper containing the following information:

-A list of four things you do well in writing/composing
-A list of four items you'd like to improve in your writing
-A paragraph describing what you learned in Basic Composition
-A paragraph in your best penmanship on any subject you want to write about.

COMPOSITION SEQUENCE

-Resume
-Business letter: registering a complaint
-Process paper: how to perform a task
-Description papers:
  Describe an object
  Describe an experience
-Argument and evidence:
  Movie review
  Essay exam
  Current issues
-Review essay: write about yourself using any organizational pattern listed above.

PRESENTATION/EVALUATION

Each student receives a model of the assignment. Intended audience, structure, detail of the model are discussed.

Students work on early draft materials.

The class constructs a rating sheet based on the model, then finish their own papers.

The class divides into small groups to evaluate the finished papers. using the rating sheets constructed earlier. The instructor monitors the results, sending papers back to the review boards if necessary and hearing appeals from the writers. Occasionally , the entire class will discuss and rate the model itself or a few sample papers volunteered by class members; this technique increases consensus and consistency among the class in their evaluations.

FINAL DAY

Student re-examines folder full of the trimester's work and writes an essay analyzing progress this trimester, future development needed and plans for working on that development. The paper is filed in the folder and passed on to the Advanced Composition teacher for use in the subsequent year.

A TYPICAL WEEK

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
1. Assign spelling 2. Practice penmanship 3. Present and analyze composition model 4. Begin draft	Construct rating sheet	1. Spelling 2. Penmanship and/or vocabulary practice 3. Draft and edit composition	1. Complete essays 2. Begin critiquing	1. Spelling 2. Complete critiquing if needed 3. Optional: class discussion journal writing, or vocabulary work

Parallel to and concurrent with the above, each sudent will complete three single-spaced pages of writing every two weeks. Subject is entirely student's choice and can be completely private.

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